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Epic Opera:
The Weill-Brecht Collaboration.

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by

Janet Tonin

In partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree
Master of Music
(Voice Performance)
January, 1992

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Dr Christopher Lewis and to Brenda Dalen, whose courage is truly an inspiration.


From the time I commenced my studies at the University of Alberta (Fall 1985) through to the completion of my Masters degree (Spring 1992), I had the great fortune to be a student of Dr Christopher Lewis.

I was a student in his Second-Year Theory and Twentieth-Century Theory courses. His influence and effect on me at the undergraduate level was nothing short of profound and when I decided to pursue studies at the graduate level I was fortunate to have Chris Lewis as my thesis/essay advisor.

When I arrived at the University of Alberta I had previously studied music theory at college, and had found it to be a rather dry intellectual exercise -- a necessary evil that all would-be performers must endure! What I discovered in Dr Lewis's class was a music theory that had little similarity to the drudgery I had known. One of the greatest compliments I can pay to Chris Lewis the teacher is that he was able to instill in me an eagerness to learn and excel in a subject for which I had always felt little affinity or interest. When I met Dr Lewis, I was an aspiring singer. After my first term with him I realized being an aspiring musician with a complete knowledge of one's craft was a far more interesting goal.

When I entered Dr Lewis's Twentieth-Century Theory course I was introduced to more advanced concepts of music theory and analytical thinking. It was in this course that I began to fully appreciate what kind of teacher Chris Lewis was. My fledgling attempts at more critical and independent analysis were always met with encouragement and constructive criticism. Material in the Twentieth Century course was often complex; however, Lewis adeptly presented it in an infinite variety of combinations and permutations so that eventually, even the slowest of us (i.e. myself) were able to catch on. This was a course that I will always remember as one of the most challenging, rigorous, and surprisingly entertaining events of my academic career. This class could have been a nightmare, but in Dr Lewis's hands it excited -- what more could a student ask for. Endless patience and an after class open door policy were added bonuses.

Dr Lewis was able to engender in his students the desire and determination to achieve in class. Perhaps it was because each week we witnessed a man completely and passionately committed to his work. The primary strength of Lewis's teaching was his incredible command of the subject material. This knowledge combined with an intense commitment to communicate to every level of student in the class put Dr Lewis in the category of truly brilliant teachers. Whether it was through dry wit, goofy anecdotes, or precise no-nonsense definitions Lewis was, in my opinion, able to communicate more thoroughly than any other teacher I have known.



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When I began graduate studies I knew there was only one teacher I trusted to help and guide me through the essay component of my degree. Dr Lewis spent unending hours counselling, advising and just listening to a young musician's ideas -- no matter how bizarre! By the time I had completed my degree in the spring of 1992 I counted Chris Lewis not only as my teacher, but as a mentor and most of all as a friend. Today, in my own teaching, I try to remember the standard he set and the excitement for learning that he inspired. The influence he has on my life is enormous, the respect I have for him is immeasurable.

Janet Tonin
B.Mus.(Honours) 1989
M.Mus. 1992

Epic Opera: The Weill-Brecht Collaboration

I have found in my present close collaboration with Brecht the feasibility of constructing a libretto whose total plan and scenario have been worked out together in all details, word for word, according to musical considerations.¹

These optimistic words written by Kurt Weill in 1928 illustrate the artistic ethos he shared with Bertolt Brecht during the development of their epic opera form. The purpose of this essay is to examine the genesis, development, final result, and impact of the Weill-Brecht conception of epic opera, with special reference to their representative work in this form, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Necessary to the study of the Weill-Brecht collaboration is an understanding of the artistic, political and sociological ideals of the Weimar Republic in the years 1923-30, and of Brecht and Weill's individual aesthetics, creative influences, and creative processes.

The cultural milieu in post-war Germany, particularly in Berlin, was characterized by the rise of two distinct wings of the intelligentsia: one of the left and one of the right, both split into numerous factions, each with its own newspapers, literature, theatre, music, and cinema.² Just as German

¹ Kurt Weill, "Zeitoper," *Melos* 7 (March 1928):107.

²Walter Laquer, *Weimar: A Cultural History 1918-1933*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 43.

culture was an unstable amalgam of conflicting ideologies, so too were German politics, which often displayed marks of internal disagreement and instability. Reaction to the defeat suffered in World War I left the German masses embittered and resentful, not only toward the rest of Europe, but toward their own government. The fragile Republic struggled with post-war unemployment, inflation, reparations, and a sustained sense of inferiority to the rest of Europe. In this atmosphere, both wings of the German artistic community which had already begun a trend in the early years of the century toward a more socially conscious aesthetic, exploded into action. Few eras in Western cultural history have experienced such a flowering of innovative and reactionary artistic aims as occurred in the Weimar Republic from 1919-33. It was, in fact, a period of unprecedented political and cultural freedom.³

The shift in aesthetic was clearly apparent in the worlds of theatre and music. By 1923 Expressionism, a movement that had informed art, literature, film, music and theatre, was on the wane. In theatre, 'naturalism' or illusory theatre was popular but quickly losing ground to the political theatre of Erwin Piscator and his associates. Directors and producers such as Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner, and especially Piscator had a profound influence and effect upon young playwrights and producers, including Bertolt Brecht. Piscator's enormously important manifesto The Political Theatre was an essential step in the politicization of theatre.⁴ "The overwhelming mood was one of anti-establishment, toward

³Laquer, *Weimar: A Cultural History*, p. 47.

⁴John Fugie, *The Essential Brecht*, (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1972), p. 13.

politics and politics' handmaiden, Art."⁵ Aesthetic nihilism dominated artistic thought but soon cooled to a leftist attitude of objectivism and anti-bourgeois logic. The term "epic theatre" first appears at this time, used by Piscator as a synonym for political theatre:

Fighting one of the perennial battles of art and art criticism, Piscator demands in essence that the "lies" of "Art" be replaced by the "true" world of facts. The world out there will be brought into the theatre in all its "epic breadth and fullness" and will be allowed to tell its own story; this story, rather obviously, will have profound political implications ⁶

A similar upheaval occurred in musical aesthetics as well, although it was not as overtly political in nature as that in theatre. By the early to mid 1920s the break with traditional tonality had been made and the subsequent search for a new basis of structure was well underway. Rejection of Expressionism and the supposed excesses of the post-Romantic era was virtually absolute. The second Viennese school (Schoenberg, Webern, Berg and their proponents) were beginning their 12-tone compositions, Stravinsky was actively exploring "neo-classicism," and Hindemith was espousing the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik*, or "music for use." Although their compositional styles were dissimilar, Hindemith and Kurt Weill were both prominent in Berlin during the 1920s. Opera at this time was in a tremendous state of turmoil. Well into the twentieth century, opera exhibited a post-Wagnerian tendency toward dramatic expressive structures.⁷ Some composers, like Busoni in (*Doktor Faust*), tackled

⁵Ibid., p. 13. Piscator later claims: "Art is Shit." This becomes a watchword for the entire anti-art movement.

⁶Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*, p. 15.

⁷Eric Salzman, *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2nd. ed., 1974), p. 98.

psychological ideas in a Wagnerian style. Alban Berg chose to revolutionize the use of classical forms in *Wozzeck*, as did Stravinsky in his music theatre compositions and ballets. Ernst Krenek (*Johnny Spielt auf*) and Hindemith (*Mathis der Maler*), employed anti-realistic, "expressionist" techniques to represent symbolic, moral, or philosophical ideas.⁸

Nonetheless, with the exception of the Weill-Brecht collaboration, opera in the Weimar Republic, perhaps because of its elitist nature, never fully addressed the political or social problems of the time. The arena in which politics and ideas of social consciousness did enter music was the German cabaret. The post-war situation gave rise to a relaxation of both moral and political censorship and a new permissive air pervaded Berlin. This brought forth a group of serious left-wing critics (artists), and the cabaret became their political tool and meeting ground. The texts of cabaret songs were politically oriented, and the music was heavily influenced by American jazz. Inevitably, the cabaret music had a pronounced effect upon German music theatre. Kurt Weill became the foremost composer of the so called "banal-song" style--a synthesis of cabaret, jazz, and traditional music theatre/opera.

If there is one trait which may be ascribed above all others to the character of Bertolt Brecht (b. 1898) it would perhaps be contradiction. In his politics, in his personal life and in his creative aesthetic Brecht consistently leaves one with an impression of uncertainty. Much of the confusion surrounding him and his theories arose from his own inability to articulate his ideas succinctly. It was not uncommon for Brecht to rewrite or edit works twenty to thirty times; this need constantly to redefine is

⁸Ibid., p. 97.

apparent in his theatrical theories and philosophies as well. Brecht was a collective personality, happiest in the midst of fellow artists and collaborators, drawing ideas from them all.⁹ Knowledge of his life and politics is essential in attaining an understanding of his theatrical ideas.¹⁰ He was deeply involved in the conflicts of his time, particularly during the pre-Hitler years. Martin Esslin in his critical study, Bertolt Brecht: A Choice of Evils, states:

Throughout his life Brecht loved to picture himself as representative of tormented twentieth-century man--as a child of nature exiled to the barren asphalt and concrete cities of the industrial age.¹¹

His artistic and life aesthetics were based on the rejection of anything that resembled sentiment, particularly of a religious or patriotic nature. He had an appreciation of irony and parody and "a proclaimed faith in the wisdom of cowardice."¹² Many critics believe his involvement in WW I as a medical orderly witnessing the horrors of an army hospital had a profound effect upon his entire career. Esslin believes that "the blatant cynicism of his public persona in later life is all too obviously the mask of one whose faith has been shattered and who has decided to meet the world on its own inhuman terms."¹³

In the early to mid twenties, following a period of dissipation among the Munich and Berlin cabaret sets, Brecht's interest in Marxism and his

⁹Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Eyre Methuen, 3rd. ed, 1980), p. 16.

¹⁰A discussion of Brecht's life and times is beyond the scope of this paper. Please refer to Frederic Ewen's *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art and His Times* (New York: Citadel, 1967) or John Fugie's *The Essential Brecht*, (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1972) for full biographical information.

¹¹Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, p. 3.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 7

growing anti-bourgeois attitude became more apparent. At this time he began to write about his theory of a new socially and politically aware theatre whose aim was not to entertain but to provoke intellectual and critical thought. Like Erwin Piscator, Brecht wanted a scientific, Marxist drama employing the use of posters, placards, songs, and choruses, but unlike Piscator, Brecht laid great stress on the poetic aspects of such a drama.¹⁴ Brecht's epic theatre is founded on three basic ideas: "New dramaturgical constructs embracing different raw materials; a new style of production that would de-emphasize emotion; and a new spectator who would coolly and scientifically appreciate this new theatre concept."¹⁵ These elements above run throughout Brecht's works and provide much of the framework for the Weill-Brecht opera/music theatre collaborations. In addition, Brecht's highly innovative use of the German language gives his work a special quality--particularly when it is partnered with the music of Kurt Weill. It is not Brecht's words, which according to Harry Kahn are 'banal,' but the way that they are put together that amounts to genius.¹⁶ Ernest Borneman in his article "Ein Epitaph für Bertolt Brecht" isolated the four main sources of Brecht's language: "1-the daily speech of Southern Germany; 2-an anti- metaphorical poetry of colours, textures and other concrete images; 3-bureaucratic jargon; 4- Anglicisms and exotic expressions."¹⁷ These elements of language give Brecht's works a distinctly acerbic quality.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 23

¹⁵Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*, p. 18. For a complete discussion of Brecht's epic theatre refer to Martin Esslin's *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, (London: Eyre Methuen. 3rd. ed., 1980), Chapter 6: 110-135.

¹⁶Harry Kahn, "Bert Brecht," *Die Weltbühne*, (Berlin, 17, 1, 1928).

¹⁷Ernest Borneman, "Ein Epitaph für Bertolt Brecht," *Sinn und Form*, (Second Special Brecht Issue, 1957), p. 142.

Musically, Brecht was not overly talented; however, he was often to be found in bars and cabarets singing his own compositions and accompanying himself on the guitar. His preference was for a melody which fit the syntax of the text and did not detract from the words. He detested Beethoven and the sound of violins, but enjoyed Bach and Mozart. Brecht especially disliked traditional concert performances and their atmosphere of pretension and spectacle. Esslin remarks: "so great was Brecht's contempt for this kind of music that he rejected the term itself and designated the music he liked by a new generic term he invented for himself: *Misuk* ." ¹⁸ Defining *Misuk* is difficult, but it is above all 'popular' and geared toward the masses. Although Brecht was not a composer, he knew exactly what he wanted, and allowed his musical collaborators little room for negotiation. This was to become a fundamental problem which ultimately led to the dissolution of his collaboration with Kurt Weill.

For Kurt Weill (b.1900) the Weimar years marked a period of professional solidification. After the completion of his studies under the guidance of Ferruccio Busoni, at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, Weill embarked upon a compositional career supported by assistant conducting positions in nearby opera houses.¹⁹ His works from the early twenties are in a musical style heavily influenced by Busoni and by Weill's idol Gustav Mahler, with distilled and simplified musical and tonal language and form.²⁰ By the middle of the decade Weill, like most artists of the time,

¹⁸ Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, p. 32.

¹⁹For complete biographical information refer to David Drew's *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1987) or Douglas Jarman's *Kurt Weill: An Illustrated Biography*, (London: Orbis. 1982).

²⁰Kim Kowalko, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1979), p. 161.

completely rejected the aesthetic tenets of Romanticism in favor of more sociological concerns. Kim Kowalke, in his excellent book Kurt Weill in Europe, points out that Weill's essays from 1927-33 reflect a shift in aesthetic particularly in relation to music theatre and opera, affecting his views on both the musical substance and the subject of musical dramatic works; however, it should be noted that Weill was more concerned with the audience and the role of music theatre in contemporary society than with pure aesthetics.²¹ He sought a form which would eschew individual concerns in favor of topics with a more universal validity, thereby enlarging the limited audience for opera. What Weill termed "the splendid isolation of opera" had to be broken. This could be accomplished only by collaboration with equally talented and committed artists in other disciplines, similarly dedicated to creating musicals or operas which would confront the issues of the time in timeless form and with global application. In short, opera had to evolve into a new "epic form." Kowalke notes that "In endeavoring to create music that was capable of satisfying the musical needs of broader population levels, Weill cautioned against diluting its artistic substance. For that reason, he shunned association with such catchwords as *Gebrauchsmusik* and *Zeitoper*. As Kowalke clearly indicates, Weill was independently exploring new epic concepts in music theatre and opera before his collaboration with Brecht. It has been a long and falsely held opinion of many Brecht scholars that Weill was nothing more than the composer for Brecht's texts. Imminent Brecht scholar Martin Esslin is one of the few who acknowledges that "Brecht's theory of

²¹Ibid., p. 109 . The following discussion is based largely upon "Weill's Essays: A Context for His Music," Chapter 3 of Kowalke's *Kurt Weill in Europe*.

the function of opera and of the epic theatre in general owes a great deal to Weill's ideas."²²

By 1927 Kurt Weill's artistic aesthetic and compositional style had reached maturation. Musically, his works from this time forward are characterized by American jazz idioms, the pervasive use of modern dance rhythms (e.g., tango, fox-trot), repeated rhythmic patterns or traditional ostinatos, double-tonic sonorities related by the interval of a third, harmonic progressions connected by semitone movement, and bass lines of fourths and fifths that listeners hear as tonic/dominant relationships but which conflict with the remaining harmonic material.²³ The main unit of musical structure in Weill's works from 1926-34 was the *Song*. This particular vocal form will be discussed later in relation to specific innovations of the Weill-Brecht collaboration.

It is difficult to describe the theoretical basis of Weill's compositional processes as he seldom wrote or spoke about them; as Kowalke observes, Weill's approach to composition was more intuitive than systematic in nature.²⁴ By 1927 he had established his own personal aesthetic and had begun to make his professional mark in the Republic. It was the ideal time for this shy but determined young composer to meet the rising rebel of the theatre community, Bertolt Brecht.

There is some discrepancy concerning the origins of the Weill and Brecht collaboration. Brecht claims it was he who first sought out Weill;

²²Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, p.32.

²³Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, p.301-306.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 132.

however, Lotte Lenya (Weill's wife) recalls that the two men were brought together by mutual friends, and that in fact it was Weill who suggested that he would like to set some of Brecht's poems. Regardless of who instigated the meeting, in March of 1927 a collaboration which has now assumed legendary proportions began. Weill and Brecht certainly recognized what they wanted from each other. Lenya remembers, "Kurt and Brecht visited each other quite often and started discussing what they could do together".²⁵ What brought Brecht and Weill into partnership? It is difficult to analyze the specific elements that they had in common. Both were committed to the creation of a theatre or music theatre which dealt with specific socio-political themes. It seems strange that two such intellectual artists never published any written material in which they explain the basis for their collaboration. The material we do have was published individually or near the conclusion of their association, when each felt the differences in their aesthetics had to be expressed. For his part, Weill in 1927 was an opera composer of some repute who had collaborated with writers like George Kaiser and Yvan Goll and he wanted only the best librettists to work on his projects, which would incorporate the great ideas of his time into the musical form of opera. This, Weill concluded, could be achieved only from the collaboration of a musician and literary figure of equivalent standards. Brecht was a natural choice, for at this time he was acknowledged as Germany's leading political playwright. As for Brecht, he was a poet turned playwright but nevertheless still included many poems in his works. In his conception of theatre these poems needed to be sung. Music had always functioned as a major

²⁵Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short: The Life and Music of Kurt Weill*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), p.81.

component in Brecht's works, defining character, providing dramatic variety and establishing the mood and ironic contradictions of the epic theatre²⁶. In his article "The Operatic Brecht," Robert Marx states, "No modern playwright had a better sense of the power of music in the theatre, and few ever used music more shrewdly or effectively than Brecht."²⁷ Whatever their individual motives for collaboration were, it appears that, in what Ronald Sanders describes as "their first flush of enthusiasm" both Weill and Brecht were willing to let their potential differences go unnoticed. Eventually, by the end of their work on the opera *Mahagonny*, these differences would become too difficult to contend with.

The collaboration which began in March 1927 had ended by 1933. By then, Weill and Brecht had produced nine complete works, two of which ensured their fame as composers of a new brand of opera: *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (hereafter referred to as *Mahagonny*, 1930), represent the most complete synthesis of the ideas of epic theatre into the operatic form.²⁸ A full-scale opera based on Brecht's mythical city of *Mahagonny* (a place where anything is possible as long as you can pay for it) was in fact their first project idea, yet it was one of the last works to be completed. Many of the epic concepts that appear in *Mahagonny* were initially worked out in two earlier works: *Die Dreigroschenoper* and the *Mahagonny Songspiel*. In April of 1927, Weill received a commission for a short opera or cantata from the Baden-Baden Music Festival. After consulting with Brecht, it was

²⁶Robert Marx, "The Operatic Brecht", *American Scholar* 44 (March 1975): 283.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸For a complete list of the works by Weill and Brecht refer to David Drew's thematic catalogue *Kurt Weill: A Handbook*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

decided that Weill would set five of the Mahagonny poems from Brecht's previous work *Die Hauspostille*, thus using them as a study for the opera. This project, entitled *The Mahagonny Songspiel* was complete by May 1927 and was premiered at the festival on 18 July 1927 along with Milhaud's *The Rape of Europe*, Ernst Toch's *The Princess and the Pea*, and Hindemith's *Hin und Zurück*. The *Songspiel*, for six singers (two women, and four men) and small orchestra, is a series of six songs interspersed with short orchestral interludes. The set, designed by Casper Neher, was a small boxing ring behind which flashed a set of projections depicting a series of raw expressionist scenes of violence and greed. The singers took their places by climbing through the ropes of the boxing ring. Though dressed for an evening out, the performers adopted the attitudes of tough characters with names like Jessie, Bessie, Charlie, Billy, Bobby and Jimmy. At the completion of the performance the singers held up placards emblazoned with provocative slogans.²⁹ The piece is extremely "Brechtian" in style. In 1927 Brecht was happy to poke fun at the pretensions of high culture: he wanted the theatre to be a place of lowbrow fun, where people smoked and made conversation just as at a sporting event--hence the boxing ring. Weill became caught up in Brecht's ironic wit and composed a score that contains a quality of coarseness and aggressive needling of the audience throughout. He drew upon elements from jazz, opera, and cabaret idioms. For their innovative ideas, Weill and Brecht needed a new structural principle upon which to base their work. They chose a form which they called the *Song*, a term coined by Weill and Brecht as they found *Lied* or *Gesang* far too pretentious. To date, Weill

²⁹Sanders, p. 91. The following discussion of the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, *Threepenny Opera*, and the *Song*, taken from Sanders, Chapters 7 and 8.

had never included an aria, much less a song in any of his works. Brecht later remarked about Weill that "up to that time Weill had written relatively complicated music mainly of a psychological sort, and when he agreed to set a series of more or less banal *Song* texts he was making a courageous break with the prejudice which the solid bulk of serious composers stubbornly held."³⁰ Weill and Brecht wanted to stress the point that they were doing something new by introducing the *Song* into the genres of opera and cantata. The importance of the *Song*, lies in its gestic function within epic theatre. In Brechtian drama the *Gestus* is generally some form of distinct artifact--for example, a mask or tricks with makeup--whereby the prime meaning of a character or situation is emphasized in some simplistic way. It was essential that the *Gestus* prompt an attitude of reflection rather than emotion. The greatest difference between concert music and gestic music is that the shapes the latter takes on are always explicitly and verbally justified. In the Weill-Brecht collaboration singing and the *Song* are gestic functions. Weill's *Songs* were almost always constructed as strophic variations. A natural melodist, (certainly one of the factors which later caused problems for himself and Brecht) Weill used bits of repeated melody throughout his songs as anchors between the many interesting stretches of dissonance. Quite often, he would deliberately set a *Song* in a strict dance rhythm to contrast ironically with Brecht's gritty, biting and often reactionary texts. The overall effect evoked by the alternation of the spoken dialogue and these *Songs* is one of distancing. The audience and the actors/singers are both aware that as a character sings he is not in the rational realm and should never pretend to be. The result

³⁰Sanders, p. 86.

that Weill and Brecht hoped to create in the *Mahagonny Songspiel* was one of dramatic effect.

It was a novel dramatic idea that had called the tune, and with this had come a novel combination of musical ones. In the context, even touches of banality were allowed; for banality, along with melody itself-both banished for a time from the "serious" musical stage- was now being welcomed back by a newfound sense of humor.³¹

Judging by the reception of the premiere, they were successful in their first endeavor. The astonishment of the Baden-Baden audience was immeasurable and reaction was swift and sensational. Weill and Brecht knew they had broken a barrier and were onto something new. Music theatre/opera, employing many of the dramatic elements already in use in Brecht's modern epic theatre, could be used as a forum for political and sociological concerns. A new brand of German music theatre, devoid of any post-Romantic excesses, and specifically geared to the masses seemed to be on the horizon.

With the *Mahagonny Songspiel* complete, Brecht and Weill once again set to work on the libretto for the full scale *Mahagonny* opera. In 1928 work was interrupted by another commission, this time from the theatre producer Ernst-Josef Aufricht. The proposed piece was a reworking of John Gay's *The Begger's Opera*, a project that Brecht had begun on his own. Though impressed with the satirical wit of Brecht's sample scenes, Aufricht was less enthusiastic about the addition of Kurt Weill to the project, as he was an unproven commodity in the commercial

³¹Sanders, p. 93.

theatre. Nevertheless, in the early summer of 1928, Weill and Brecht sequestered themselves in a villa on the French Riviera, working night and day on what was to become *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*). In their conception of the work, Brecht and Weill followed the foundation laid out by Gay, mocking the conventions of bourgeois society in the story and those of bourgeois art in the form and music. As Gay and Pepusch had mocked the tradition of Handelian opera, so did Brecht and Weill mock the current state of German opera and theatre. Though many elements of the original work were retained, the results of the Brecht-Weill adaptation were completely unique. Once again, Brecht's pointed satire--particularly in the *Song* texts--and Weill's blend of jazz and opera produced a remarkably innovative work. The contrast between the fugal character of the overture and the hurdy-gurdy accompaniment could not be greater, and takes us very far from conventional opera. A more complete study of *The Threepenny Opera* is beyond the scope of this paper, but it did play a role in the development of the Brecht-Weill epic concept, and had an impact on the later full-length opera *Mahagonny*.³² In *Threepenny*, Brecht and Weill present an opera as beggars and roughnecks would present it. As Ronald Sanders points out, it established a vehicle for the two collaborators that enabled them both to show off their particular talents to the best advantage. "For Brecht, the stress upon the artificial element made the conception into epic theatre, and for Weill, it provided a chance to realize the old dream of doing a kind of updated *Singspiel*, made up of popular melodic motifs, justified by the conscientiously lowbrow atmosphere of the play."³³ In *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht and Weill

³²For a detailed study of *The Threepenny Opera* please see Stephen Hinton's work *Kurt Weill: Threepenny Opera*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³³Sanders, p. 124.

were in complete accord about the creation of music theatre/opera. At that time, Weill accepted Brecht's concept of drama and music as not emotive but rather conducive to thought, and his music was still largely intellectual and quite emotionally detached. However, this was not always to be the case and Weill's ever-increasing use of tuneful emotive melodies after *Threepenny* would soon cause problems between Brecht and himself. With the amazing success of *Threepenny*, Brecht seemed content with the innovations that had been brought to music theatre while Weill was still looking to revolutionize the operatic genre in the same fashion. In *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* he came as close to achieving this goal as he ever would.

Mahagonny was begun in 1927 and completed only two years later in April of 1929. Because the text was to be set completely to music Weill was part of the creative process from the beginning, helping Brecht and his other collaborator Elizabeth Hauptmann³⁴ with the text and formal structure. Early in their discussions Brecht and Weill brought in the last member of their collective, designer Casper Neher, whose sets and projections were to become a vital third dimension of the finished product. The artistic ethos behind the work this group conceived is most interesting. The era of expressionism may be summed up in Kierkegaard's words "the individual cannot help his age; he can only express that it is doomed." For Weill and Brecht, this ideal could never be embraced. They believed that Man creates his own misfortune and as such, is capable of changing it.. However, this can happen only if he is shocked into accepting responsibility

³⁴ Hauptmann had collaborated with Brecht on a number of his important theatre pieces; she wrote the two English *Mahagonny* songs. See Bertolt Brecht: Collected plays vol. 2 part 3, ed. by John Willett and Ralph Mannheim (London: Eyre, 1979), p. viii.

for his actions. Thus, outwardly negative qualities such as greed, corruption, and vice must be viewed objectively and without criticism.³⁵ These sociological ideas provide the foundation for the most complex of the works created by Brecht and Weill, the "modern opera" *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

The plot of Mahagonny concerns the fate of a utopian city, in which men's desires are to be completely fulfilled. But suddenly a decadence sets in. Desires and prices rise together. The novel maxim 'All is permitted', which is to make the people of Mahagonny happy, leads directly to the downfall of the city. The collective fate of Mahagonny is mirrored in the individual fates of the woodcutter, Johann Ackermann and his friends. Johann is doomed to end in the electric chair the minute he can no longer pay for his food or drink: for to be money-less is the worst of all crimes. Thus, didactically, is the capitalist system shown, carried to its ultimate conclusion.³⁶

The authors' intent to shock was obvious and deliberate, with little regard for the precarious political ground on which they were treading. Their purpose was to create a radical kind of work, or an epic opera whose form, content, and ethos reflected the wide area of agreement between them.³⁷ The form (presumably agreed upon by all) for their epic opera was based on a sequence of self-contained musical units which corresponded to a 'step-by-step' juxtaposition of situations on the model of Brecht's earlier play *Mann ist Mann*. For Brecht, there is great concern for the individual aspects of operatic structure (i.e., words, music, and setting). This is based largely on Brecht's reworking of the Wagnerian idea of *Gesamtkunstwerke* or the integration of text, music and production. However, rather than

³⁵Elaine Padmore, "Kurt Weill," *Music and Musician* 21 (October 1972) 36.

³⁶"Background to Mahagonny," *Opera* 14 (February 1963): 88.

³⁷My discussion of the artistic aesthetic for *Mahagonny* is based on pp. viii-xx of Bertolt Brecht: *Collected Plays*.

unifying these elements, Brecht proposes a radical separation of them, thereby eliminating the problem of the question of whether music gives rise to text or scene to text, or music to scene, and so on. This concept allows the audience to observe the dramatic situation objectively rather than become emotionally involved with one particular aspect. In short, the spectator is kept at arm's length so that emotions may be clarified and controlled. In practice, this led to a variety of montage, a structural principle that had always figured highly in Brecht's earlier works. Weill's view of modern opera is best described by himself in an article entitled "*Zeitoper* " which appeared in March 1928:

In opera great subjects demand a great form for their representation. The broader and more significant the occasions for making music become, the greater the possibilities for the development of music in opera. The new operatic theater that is being generated today has epic character. It does not propose to describe, but to report. It no longer proposes to tell about man, his actions and what impels him to commit them. Music in the new operatic theater renounces pumping up the action from within, glazing over the transitions, supplying the background for events, and stirring up passions. It goes its own vast, peaceful way; it begins only at the static moments of the plot, and it can therefore preserve its absolute *concertante* character (if it hits on the right subject matter). Since the narrative form never permits the spectator to be in suspense or uncertainty over the stage events, music can reserve for itself its own independent, purely musical effect ³⁸

These statements and Brecht's, make quite clear the similarities in the two men's opera aesthetic; however, in the same article Weill also contradicts one of Brecht's basic assertions concerning epic opera.

³⁸Cited in Kowalke's *Kurt Weill in Europe*, p. 483

The repeatedly-expressed apprehension that a collaboration with worthy literary figures could bring music, into a dependent, subservient, or only equal relationship to the text is completely unfounded. For the more powerful the writer, the more he is able to adapt himself to music, and so much the more is he stimulated to create genuine poetry for music. (May I inform you that I have found in my present close collaboration with Brecht the feasibility of constructing a libretto whose total plan and scenario has been worked out together in all details, word for word, according to musical considerations.)³⁹

This statement obviously does not correspond with Brecht's somewhat idealistic concept that text, music, and setting be completely separate and independent. Not surprisingly, these same incongruities show up in the finished *Mahagonny* opera. Thus, defining a concise, neat aesthetic for epic opera is a trifle awkward. The question then arises, whether there was enough common ground between the two men to realize their lofty ambitions successfully. To answer this question the theoretical and aesthetic pronouncements by both Weill and Brecht need to be put aside and the work itself must be examined. What actually evolved out of their extensive intellectualizing?

There is no doubt that *Mahagonny* is an innovative and disturbing piece of theatre. It uses and abuses the traditional methods of opera, but it also widens the scope of the genre, making it rather difficult for the audience to digest. The subject matter (i.e., the capitalistic rise and fall of a city and its inhabitants) is certainly epic in its content. Weill and Brecht, like most Europeans, were fascinated by America, land of rabid capitalism; and pseudo-American references--from the choice of character names

³⁹Ibid., p. 483.

(Jimmy Mahoney, Jenny, Fatty, Jake Smith) to its nebulous location somewhere on the Florida Gold Coast, permeate the work . Weill would later include in his prompt book a request that productions never interpret the city of Mahagonny as a rollicking, bawdy Western American town. Both collaborators wanted to maintain Mahagonny's undetermined location in an attempt to acknowledge that the events of *Mahagonny* could occur anywhere at anytime, thus keeping in line with their epic aspirations. The opera is structured in three acts which comprise 21 moral tableaux or scenes. Act One depicts the founding of a city by three escaped criminals, the arrival of various characters of ill repute, and the town's near-brush with destruction during a hurricane. Act Two (perhaps the most interesting) is a series of scenes illustrating the four vices of the men and women of Mahagonny: eating, lovemaking, boxing, and drinking. Here Brecht's gift of guttural, biting language is most prevalent.

One means to eat all you are able;
 Two to change your loves about;
 Three means the ring and gaming tables;
 Four, to drink until you pass out.
 Moreover, better get it clear
 That Don'ts are not permitted here.

The character Jimmy Mahoney (or Johann Ackerman) commits the greatest of all sins in Mahagonny: he runs out of money and cannot pay his bar bill. The third act deals with his trial and conviction. He is sentenced to death and with his execution Mahagonny is destroyed by fire and a storm of social protest. The content of the opera is completely epic in its intent. The protagonist is not human, but an entire city which, in turn, is representative of all Man. The way in which the events unfold and the

manner in which they are delivered is also epic in nature. Characters report rather than describe and if one listens to just the text one never hears an appeal to the audience for sympathy. This is Brecht's insistence that all narcotic and 'culinary' elements in opera be eliminated and be replaced by a didactic element. In Brecht's hands, the former may be disguised by the latter, as, for example, (literally and symbolically) when Jacob the Glutton eats himself to death in front of a film projection of a glutton. With the addition of Weill's music the epic character wanes. The music, a slow Viennese waltz, sets off the scene stunningly; however, the simple charm of the waltz takes the edge from the satire of Brecht. At this point, the music loses some of its *gestic* function and leans toward the emotive, a distinct undermining of the epic precepts laid out earlier.⁴⁰ Examples of this occur throughout the score. When Jimmy pays the fixed rate for establishing a relationship with Jenny (love, like everything else, must be paid for), Weill, with the use of lush chromaticisms, injects into the accompanying music an element of warmth that makes the situation more human and less business-like.⁴¹ Even though this scene contains some of the most beautiful music of the opera, it nonetheless contradicts epic ideals. Although Weill would likely argue the point, his music is at best only semi-epic in its application and intent. This is not a judgement of the music's quality, for indeed it is some of Weill's best, but rather a conclusion made on the basis of the function of music in epic theatre/opera. Certainly, Weill's mixing of *Song*, speech, *Sprechstimme*, recitative and aria is unique, as is his blend of jazz, opera, cabaret and folk idioms. His use of recurring and developing rhythmic patterns gives the score a unity

⁴⁰Branscombe, p. 484.

⁴¹ Padmore, p. 38.

which emerges from the veneer of banality and primitivisms.⁴² Because of the amazing originality of the score, Weill automatically defies the "rules" of epic theatre by placing the music's impact above that of the text or setting. We have seen that for Brecht and the other originators of the epic ideal the music was to set forth the text and help define dramatic character or situation. Weill, who in the previous *Songspiel* and *Die Dreigroschenoper* had kept his lyricism in check, when given the expanded form of the full length *Mahagonny* was unable to curb the pure melodist inside him. His own compositional aesthetic asserted itself and he could no longer set texts in the manner desired by Brecht. As David Drew suggests, the age-old battle between words and music is the cause for *Mahagonny's* limited success as an epic opera.⁴³ But Brecht was perhaps asking for the impossible when he demanded that the elements of text and music avoid contaminating each other.. Peter Branscombe points out that "Ultimately Brecht and Weill are irreconcilable--the better the composer does his job *qua* musician, the less he satisfies the poet's demands."⁴⁴ It would seem that Weill was in need of a librettist willing to function in a traditional manner, where musical considerations override all others. This was an impossibility for Brecht, who had his own definite ideas for the role of music and music collaborators in his works. Another area of contention was Weill's desire to redefine and renew the operatic form and Brecht's ultimate disappointment with the form. It manifests itself in Brecht's parody treatment of some of the dramatic situations in *Mahagonny* and Weill's desire to pay homage to a form he greatly respected. To suggest that the musical quotations in *Mahagonny* from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*

⁴²Ibid., p. 37.

⁴³Drew, quoted in *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays*, p. xvi.

⁴⁴Branscombe, p. 483.

and Weber's *Die Freischütz* are parodies similar to Brecht's literary lampoons is mildly ridiculous. Weill's admiration for Mozart and Weber bordered on veneration, and the musical quotations are not mockery but a form of homage. Moreover, Weill was extremely excited about the possibilities created by Stravinsky and others for a new modern opera; he did not consider the form to be a thing of the past.⁴⁵ Brecht, by the mid-point of their work on *Mahagonny*, had all but abandoned the operatic ideal. His dissatisfaction with the work became more apparent as it neared completion. He began to distance himself from the project (and his collaborator) and ultimately left its production and premiere in the hands of Weill and Weill's publishers.

Mahagonny premiered in Leipzig on 9 March 1930. Weill had hoped for a Berlin premiere, preferably at the Krolloper under the direction of Otto Klemperer. However, with the ever-changing political climate in the Weimar Republic and administrative problems at the Krolloper, the idea of a Berlin premiere was dropped. For the Leipzig production, Weill was forced to make significant revisions to the score, removing much of the sexual material from Act Two. The first performance was continually interrupted by demonstrations that eventually developed into a full-scale riot. After even more revisions, the work was given in Cassel with much greater success, although both Weill and Brecht felt they had sacrificed some of the best work in the piece. Weill writes,

For two whole days now I have worked with Brecht at a clarification of the events in Act 3. We now have a version which the Pope himself could no longer take exception to. It

⁴⁵David Drew, "The History of *Mahagonny*," *Musical Times* 104 (January 1963): 24

is now made clear that the final demonstrations are in no ways 'communistic'--it is simply that *Mahagonny*, like Sodom and Gomorrah, falls on account of the crimes, licentiousness, and general confusion of its inhabitants.⁴⁶

The political fall-out that occurred at the premiere had been expected, but what was the critical reaction? The distinguished German critic H.H. Stuckenschmidt witnessed the first performance of *Mahagonny* and wrote,

We have come to the point of decision: the decision that there must be a new form of opera, a radically different way for the theatre. Kurt Weill . . . has been aiming at this new form since his music-dramatic beginnings. . . . [In *Mahagonny*] there is a total and uninhibited revolution in theme; an excision of narcotic elements; a complete avoidance of pomposity and false heroics, and a thoroughgoing adoption of the techniques of film and cabaret. In addition, an emphasis of the social element. And here the music comes into its own: the widest mass effects are possible. One may lean on the popular song, and the memory of a familiar strain becomes a vigorous artistic stimulus. It is not the originality of the means which is decisive, but the power of their suggestion.⁴⁷

Until recent years, performances of *Mahagonny* have been sporadic, but with the renewed interest in the Weill-Brecht works, many have come to regard it as the most artistically interesting product of their collaboration.

In spite of the fact that *Mahagonny* did not completely live up to the initial expectation of its creators, it was a critical, if not financial, success. It was of course more of a disappointment to Brecht, who had expected a result more in keeping with his own views of epic theatre. It is somewhat ironic that the reasons why *Mahagonny* is not entirely successful as an

⁴⁶"Background to *Mahagonny*," p. 85.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 88.

example of epic opera are what make it unique. Weill's score sets this piece apart. The understated romanticism of his idiom brings a humanity to the characters which Brecht's cold sentiments do not. Ultimately for Brecht, the opera is 'culinary' in its effect and, is indeed, "nothing more or nothing less than an opera--with innovations." For Weill, *Mahagonny* confirmed his idea that opera was not a empty form with no social relevance to the time. In his mind it was an unqualified success in the epic form. What comes to light in *Mahagonny* is that in the final analysis Weill and Brecht have two versions of what constitutes epic theatre/opera. Their ideas were similar enough in concept to establish a common foundation but apparently not close enough to pursue further, for *Mahagonny* sounded the beginning of the end of the Weill-Brecht collaboration. By 1930 Brecht and Weill had begun drifting apart not only artistically but also politically and socially. Weill could never accept Brecht's conversion to communism, and Brecht by this time had already begun a new collaboration with Hans Eisler, whose ideology was more in keeping with his own. Weill and Brecht would finish three more projects together, but by 1933 the collective was dead, with both men apparently content to let it rest in peace. Today, *Mahagonny* is part of the standard operatic repertoire, its epic themes still finding relevance in late twentieth-century society. As an example of pure lyric epic theatre it is not an unqualified success, but as an example of opera, re-evaluated and redefined for the modern world and its masses, it is unparalleled.

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